

[The following letter is in response to my book *The Poetic Vision of Robert Penn Warren*]

LETTER OF RPW TO VS, SEPTEMBER 1977

2495 Redding Road  
Fairfield, Connecticut 06430

September 24, 1977

Dear Mr. Strandberg:

I can't say how touched I am by the scrupulous and painful [painstaking?] attention you have given my poems. And before I go farther, I want to say that very often you have opened my own eyes to implications—or even ideas—which I had been working with in a quite blundering and unconscious way. I suppose this is inevitable, for poetry is, at root, a way of exploring life and your reaction to it, and a way of creating, or trying to understand, the self. It is not done, as you well know, according to a blueprint, and it thrives on what seems to be happy accident. As Frost once, said, the best poems come easiest. It's really superfluous, and almost an insult to your intelligence to say that I am very ignorant of Jung—even though some of your readers will be convinced that I am writing from him. But there's no need for me to say to you that often what seems Jungian is simply something I arrived at by a different route. As a matter of fact, since I first talked with you, years ago at our place in Vermont, I have been rather afraid to read Jung. I do know James much better, but I'm sure that the relationship there, when it comes to poems, has always been very dark and devious and unconscious. One more thing, I am struck by the way you spot key psychological moments in my own life, changes which I couldn't well have documented from my own poems, in many cases.

Needless to say, I deeply appreciate what you have done for me, and your kind view of my work. I truly value that, for if anyone has earned a right to an opinion, you have. And, too, you most often hit on poems that I find meaningful to myself.

I have just finished putting together a new volume, poems written since SP—of course, reaching well back before the actual publication. I'd be curious to know what you make of these, and I may take the liberty, when some xeroxes are made, of sending you one. For one thing, always except in XXXVI Poems, I have felt when a volume was coming to an end, have felt that each one was a phase of something going on inside. This book will be deceptive in that way, for the last poem is the first in point of composition, and the groupings in three sections are mixed. But the same thing is true for me, even if I have covered my tracks, not intentionally, just by sorting out themes, as it were. As a kind of footnote, I'll say that this summer I have finished a job I've been at for more than fifteen years, in one way or another. I have rewritten BTD, and am much happier about it. But it was a strange experience. I hope you'll agree with me that it is vastly improved. There had been a mix-up in proofs and the thing published was not my (then) final form, but the difference then is nothing compared to the difference now. For one thing, as soon as I began to look at it—now years back—I felt constricted by the meter and also the sense of a certain amount of padding. So it was, on the whole, a real

rewriting in terms of rhythm (not everywhere, but in great stretches), also changes in content. I don't know yet in what order RH will want to bring these books out.

As for anything else, I have been in a long seizure of poetry (some of it rather different from anything else of mine, and some a return to rimed, or unrimed, quatrains) but it may be coming to an end (for the time being, I trust) and I have rather confused thoughts of a novel, for which RH holds a contract. It begins to feel ready to start—maybe. I always have to carry a novel around several years before I get at it. (Or sometimes a poem—Audubon was begun in the 1940's, abandoned, and then picked up again in the late 1960's—with only one line kept of the original effort—the first line of the present version.)

I hope that all goes well with you and that Duke is much to your liking. (I imagine it's a fine place to be, at least Styron tells me so.) And I hope, too, that you won't ever regret all the sweat, and grinding thought, and ingenuity that went into the RPW book. Something in your book surprised me—the use made of Whitman (whom I came to very late and only in part)—only a couple of weeks ago. Tate, on a postcard, said the same thing of me, saying he and I had followed such different lines, me Whitman and Melville among others, and he Arnold (doesn't that surprise you?). I bet it would surprise Arnold, anyway. But honestly I had never thought of Whitman in the way you treat him (229 ff). But you make a strong case—and I'm in no position to deny it.

Warmest regards--& gratefully—

Red

P.S. One final and really meaningless matter—in “Coward to Hero” I never thought of the “hero” as dead literally. Not that it matters, as you adduce some evidence. But let me say again that I regard your book as a most impressive feat of literary analysis. I am very grateful.

ADDENDUM IN POSTCARD NEXT DAY:

September 25

Dear Mr. Strandberg: Not that it matters, I guess, but I'll add a last word. Not until your book did I realize how “autobiographical” my poetry is. Not in an obvious sense, but I'm coming away from the book with a suddenly keener awareness of the relation of my own experience to the poetry. But I said, “in a sense,” and a sense not very instructive to anyone else, I presume. Secrets to the grave.

Again, all thanks! Yrs,

Red

p. 105, line 3 “lift” should be “shift”—error in first edition of book

p. 119 Bitterroot is on the map literally